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It's A Match! The Procedural Rhetoric of Gaming and Online Dating in Tinder

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Abstract

This paper explores the procedural rhetoric of the popular dating app Tinder. I argue that through its procedural rhetoric, Tinder functions to gamify dating, and provides a persuasive game worthy of rhetorical analysis. In this paper, I focus on the first two phases of a procedural rhetoric approach for studying online dating outlined by Shepherd (2016) — 1) gathering information on app functionality and 2) engaging with the user experience. Not only do the procedures and blurbs gamify Tinder, but they also call users to action, combat negative stereotypes surrounding dating and Tinder, and seek to create a commonality between users. The gamification of dating by Tinder offers many implications and also shows the need for further rhetorical study.

The Internet enables people to order new shoes, participate in democratic deliberation, and even find romance. Match.com launched in 1995, becoming the first of many online dating websites to offer a digital alternative to traditional face-to-face dating, streamlining what is the oftentimes tedious, frustrating, and dissatisfying process of courtship (Lee, 2016). As people flocked to these sites in hopes of finding love from the convenience of their homes, the industry specialized. For example, Farmersonly.com targets lonely country folk looking for the “one,” while Veggiedate.org promises “Vegetarian dating for vegetarian singles and vegetarian social networking” (Veggiedate.org). In 2012, Tinder revolutionized the notion of dating sites by launching a smartphone app that connected people by geographic location. According to the Pew Research Center in 2015, “22% of 18- to 24-year-olds now report using mobile dating apps, a more than fourfold increase from the 5% who reported using dating apps in 2013” (Smith, 2016). Dating apps are increasingly popular among young adults specifically, and Tinder in particular remains at the top of this competitive market by appealing to younger audiences through the incorporation of several game-like features. It is not uncommon for dating to be conceptualized and discussed in popular culture through the language of gaming. As Wayne Fontana’s classical 1965 song “The Game of Love” epitomizes, the pursuit of love is rife with strategic choices, meddling adversaries, countless rules, and more than a few “players” (Game of Love).

While dating has long been associated with gaming, Tinder intensifies this relationship by literally turning dating into a game. A common critique of Tinder as a dating app is that it resembles a game more than a dating site; in fact, the platform is perceived in contemporary culture as a hookup site rather than a place to make meaningful relationships. Articles with titles such as “Watch out for Players! Young Adults use Tinder more like a Game than a Way to find Love!”, “Young Adults Swipe Right on Tinder, but is it Just a Game?”, and “The Tinder Games”

show both the observation and concern that dating has become a literal game. The Chief Strategy Officer for Match Group, who owns Tinder, Amarnath Thombre, commented,

Tinder seems built to sneak people into online dating. ‘I wouldn’t even call it dating- I don’t think you need to call it dating... You enter like you’re trying to play a game and then you end up dating people. It’s more like a psychological switch. (Associated Press, 2016)

This suggests that the app’s primary function is to gamify the process of finding love online.

Dr. Ian Bogost (2010), in his book *Persuasive Games*, introduces “procedural rhetoric” as a method for studying games from a rhetorical perspective based on the capability of digital experiences to persuade users to think, feel, and act in codified ways. The connection between procedural rhetoric and traditional online dating such as Match.com, eHarmony.com, and OKCupid.com is explored by Dr. Dawn Shepherd (2016) in her book *Building Relationships: Online Dating and the New Logics of Internet Culture*. This paper will analyze the ways in which Tinder gamifies love and the implications of such a rhetorical approach to dating in the digital age. More specifically, I study how Tinder deploys what Bogost (2010) describes as “procedural rhetoric” to gain attention and shape user experience. First, I move through recent literature about online dating and procedural rhetoric both separately and conjointly. Next, I provide a brief introduction to the functionality of Tinder to then engage with my own research on the app. Finally, I offer implications as well as suggestions for further research.

The Game of Love: Online Dating and Procedural Rhetoric

Since its inception, online dating has become increasingly popular method for meeting romantic partners. Users turn to the Internet to look for one of the most intimate interpersonal relationships. For this reason, scholars are noting online dating as an important area of study

(Shepherd, 2016). Sherry Turkle (1995) suggests that in a culture of simulation, the computer is now an object for postmodernism in which “old distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex” (p. 21). Human relationships with technology are increasingly salient as people turn to computers and smartphones to assist in finding romantic partners. Recently, scholars have also given more attention to the study of videogames through procedural rhetoric (Shepherd, 2016). While research into online dating and videogames are vibrant separately, they are rarely brought into conversation with each other; this is rather surprising given the popularity of both phenomenon in digital culture. One goal of this paper is to narrow the divide between communication research on online dating and videogames.

Online Dating

When studying online dating, some scholars have turned their attention to the people and groups attracted to use these sites as a means of locating potential partners. Kang and Hoffman (2011) state that, “...a person who is trusting of others is less likely to use an online dating site, and an individual who performs a greater number of tasks on the Internet is more likely to use an online dating site” (p. 210). Other research has explored the way in which online dating is distinctively different from offline dating. For instance, Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, and Sprecher (2012) identify three distinctive features of online dating: “access to potential romantic partners, communication with potential romantic partners, and matching with compatible romantic partners” (Finkel et al., 2012, p. 4). These features have unique characteristics in Tinder due to its game-like features. Access to potential partners in Tinder is based on geographic location, giving the user access to partners within close proximity. On Tinder, communication with potential partners is only allowed if both partners have liked each other. Finally, matching with potential romantic partners on Tinder is based off very limited information about the other

person. In their research, Finkel et al. (2012) also state, “Online dating is pervasive, and it has fundamentally altered both the romantic acquaintance process and the process of compatibility matching” (Finkel et al., 2012, p. 53). This is an important finding in legitimizing the study of online dating sites; however, there has been little research on mobile phone dating apps specifically. A reason for this may be due to the newness of mobile dating apps; but their increased popularity validates them as deserving of study.

Previous research has investigated how people present themselves online, and the way users create their “ideal self” through their profile (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006). The Tinder profile differs drastically from other online dating profiles because the main feature is the photo of the users. Research shows that photo-based first impressions impact user perceptions (Olivola, Eastwick, Finkel, Ariely, & Todorov, 2011). However, a quantitative study of eHarmony.com users showed that “users consistently valued communication and characteristics such as personality or kindness more than sexual attraction” (Menkin, Robles, Wiley & Gonzaga, 2015, p. 990). Tinder differs drastically from traditional dating sites as it is a first impression, image based mobile phone app. The game is procedurally structured to encourage users to make quick decisions to either “like” or “dislike” another user based only on their picture, name, age, occupation, and current geographical location. Other information about the user is unavailable until the player clicks on the other player’s card. By design, Tinder encourages users to make quick decisions based primarily off appearances. Such a contradiction in findings between Olivola et al. (2011) that states photo-based first impressions do impact user perceptions and Menkin et al. (2015) that state online daters value other characteristics more than sexual attraction further supports the need for more research, specifically, the distinction of online dating research and mobile dating research.

In the digital age, capturing audience attention is critical for an online dater. Richard Lanham (2007) suggests that society has moved towards an attention economy where rhetoric is responsible for gaining and maintaining attention (Lanham, 2007, p. 8). For a mobile dating app, gaining the attention of potential users is vital for survival, which is precisely why Tinder's appearance as a game is intriguing to users. For this reason, additional research on these mobile dating sites will advance the literature of online dating.

Videogame Rhetoric

Digital rhetoric, as defined by Eyman (2015), is "the application of rhetorical theory (as analytic method or heuristic for production) to digital texts and performances" (Eyman, 2015, p. 2). Among the wide variety of digital texts and performances available, scholars have taken interest in videogames. Research on videogames is expansive, and in many cases, selects particular games of interest to analyze. Within the study of digital rhetoric, Ian Bogost (2010) argues that some videogames are persuasive and worthy of rhetorical study. In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost (2010) states that videogames argue through means of procedural rhetoric, described as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (Bogost, 2010, p. ix). Other scholars have used Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric as a way of studying games. For instance, Dawn Shepherd (2016) utilizes Bogost's concept of procedural to study three traditional online dating sites- Match.com, eHarmony.com, and OKCupid.com.

Procedural rhetorics, and the unique variety of engagement they afford, shed light on online dating sites, the subjectivities and relationship formations permitted (and denied) by them, and the cultural assumptions they rely on for theorizing compatibility and compelling use. (Shepherd, 2016, p. 14)

In her book, Shepherd (2016) studies three different online dating sites through three phases of a procedural rhetoric approach: 1) gathering information on app functionality, 2) engaging with the user experience and 3) developing a framework for analyzing both the application functionality and the user experience (Shepherd, 2016, p. 15). Following Shepherd in studying Tinder's procedural rhetoric, I have conducted the first two phases by gathering information on the functionality of the app and engaging with the user experience. In the next section I will detail how Tinder works and its procedures that make it a game.

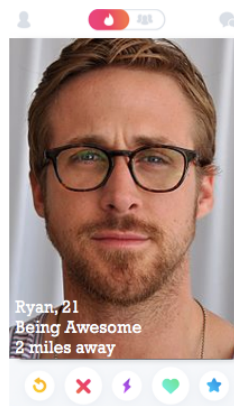
Pick a card! Any card!: The Procedural Rhetoric of Tinder

Tinder is a mobile phone app that can be downloaded for Android or Apple. The app uses the geographic location of users to match with others nearby. Users must have a Facebook account to create a profile. Users can then select up to six photos for their profile and the order in which they will appear when another user selects their card. They may also choose to write a bio of up to 500 characters. Other information that can appear on their "card" if they choose includes current school, current work, anthem (a song selected from Spotify), top Spotify artists, and gender. The card will also take any pages "liked" on Facebook and show them as common interests when the other user has also liked that page. The user has the option to connect their Instagram account to their card. The information that users input will be used in creation of their "card" that will appear to other users. The card will also show the user's age, distance from the other user, and if they have any mutual friends on Facebook.

To "play" on Tinder, the user sees a series of cards through which they swipe. The player will only be shown a new card after they respond to the one on the top of the deck. Below each card are five buttons, these are the user's controllers for the game. Each button enables the user to offer a unique response to each new card. An orange rewind arrow is available for Tinder Plus

users to replay a card that they may have passed by accident. A red “x” indicates saying no to that card; this action can also be performed by swiping the card left. The purple lightning bolt is available by purchase for the user’s own card to be the top profile in the area for 30 minutes in order to get more matches. The green heart indicates liking that card; this can also be performed by swiping right. The blue star indicates “super liking” someone so when they open the game, they know that you have already liked them. Another distinguishable feature of Tinder is that other users will only see you liked them if they also liked you. (see Figure 1). These procedures that the game has set for each user is persuasive in that it encourages users to make quick decisions in dating just like one would in a videogame.

Figure 1.



This screenshot was taken of a real user’s profile but overlaid with a stock photo of Ryan Gosling to protect the user’s identity. This image demonstrates the “controller” of the Tinder game. Image retrieved from:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fc/Ryan_Gosling_2_Cannes_2011_%28cropped%29.jpg/220px-Ryan_Gosling_2_Cannes_2011_%28cropped%29.jpg

While playing the game, players do not have the choice to pass a card; rather, they must respond one way or another. Players will only see who likes them if it is mutual and they have both liked each other (with the exception of the super like option). Once two players have both

liked each other, then “It’s a Match!” will appear on the screen and the player will decide to either “send message” or “keep swiping”.

Like other games, on Tinder there are consequences to certain actions. If a user is swiping carelessly and accidentally swipes left, in effect saying “no”, but intended to like the person, the only way to undo their decision is to pay for the rewinds in Tinder Plus. Users can purchase Tinder Plus for one month, six months, or twelve months. In this way, the consequence for carelessly or mindlessly swiping is financial. Additionally, if a player behaves in a way that is inappropriate or offensive to another player with whom they have matched, the other player can be unmatched or reported.

At the level of procedural rhetoric, videogames are ideological insofar that they reward those behaviors that are coded as conforming to the norms of the game while punishing behaviors that transgress established conventions. Players are rewarded for matching with other players with the visual cue of “It’s a Match!”. Similarly, in a videogame when a player reaches a new level generally, there is a visual indication of progress. This similarity is yet another example of the gaming ideology that is inherent in Tinder’s procedures. Additionally, the player is rewarded with the ability to message the other player. The ability of being able to communicate with another player opens the possibility for further interactions and potentially a relationship. Players are also rewarded with more options if they purchase Tinder Plus.

A critical component of dating is first impressions and snap judgements about appearance, Tinder simulates this feature of the real world in its game through its procedures. The only information that appears to the player on a card is the main picture as selected by the other player, their first name, occupation, age, and distance from the other player. To discover more about the player, one must tap the card to see their full profile. This function encourages

players to only discover more about other players to whom they are initially attracted. According to the procedures of Tinder, if there is no initial attraction based off the first picture, there is no need to bother the other player to learn more about their profile. Thus, Tinder persuades players to value appearance over other personality traits.

The specific features of this game that make it unique are that it claims to be a legitimate place for meeting new people while it simultaneously delegitimizes itself in its design as a game. Tinder has received criticism for being a hookup site since it appears to be a game, but it claims to be a dating site that “is a powerful tool to meet people, expand your social group, meet locals when you’re traveling and find people you otherwise never would have met” (Tinder). Other online dating sites build their *ethos* through the number of relationships and marriages that have resulted from their site’s algorithm, whereas Tinder builds its credibility based purely on its popularity.

The game encourages the player to see other hopeful singles as well as themselves as players in a game. This effect can be positive in that it can make dating easier for those who are too nervous for traditional ways of meeting offline; however, it can also be negative in that it encourages people to look at potential romantic partners as objects in a game.

The Player (User) Experience

To engage in the procedural rhetoric of Tinder, I created my own profile to gather information as well as borrowing accounts of other friends to expand the amount of ethnographic data collected. As a user, one of the most interesting pieces of rhetoric in the game was the message blurbs that appear when I selected a name with which I matched. In hopes of encouraging other players to message one another, the app shows short blurbs above the message box. Often the blurbs would downplay a player’s hesitation to send a message by sexualizing

their hesitation. “Are your hands tied or something?” This was one of the fifty blurbs that I recorded from the app. Each time you select the same person’s profile, a different blurb appears. Interestingly, depending on the user, a different message would appear. As a new account, I was only able to collect thirteen unique blurbs. However, after viewing a friend’s version of the app, who has matched with more people and of both genders, they had over thirty-seven unique blurbs on their version of the app. Of the fifty blurbs I collected, there were three salient features with at least one being present in each blurb. These features were a call to individual action, combatting a stereotype, and creating a commonality.

Call to Individual Action

These types of blurbs were most common and seek to encourage users to write something in a message. Examples of these types include: “See that box down there? Type something witty into it.”, “Did the cat bite your tongue?”, “They won’t know until you tell them”, “You’ll never meet 100% of the matches you don’t message”, “How long until you send a message”, “The one who sends the first message wins. Ready. Set. Go!”. Each of these blurbs are a call to action, the action being to send a message. The blurbs serve as a reminder to the player of the purpose of the game—to interact with others to meet potential romantic partners. It rhetorically puts the controller in the hands of the player as they have the ability to start a conversation with one simple action. Many of the blurbs that have a call to individual action do so by mitigating the fear that someone might have about sending the first message. These types of blurbs tend to use sarcasm and other forms of logical appeals to downplay potential fears of the user. However, there were also blurbs that featured a positive call to action: “Say something nice about one of their photos”, “Say something funny!”, “Give them a compliment and watch what happens.”, “Tell them about a crazy experience you just had.” In these types of call to action blurbs, the

game is supporting the player in sending a message through positive reinforcement. Call to action blurbs invite and entice the player to interact with the app beyond a game of swiping.

Stereotyping

These types of blurbs can either combat or enhance stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes are in regard to online dating specifically, but also include stereotypes in general about dating. For example, the blurb, “There is nothing wrong with sending the first message”, undercuts the stereotype that there is something wrong if you send the first message. In addition to blurbs that include stereotypes about dating, some blurbs reference stereotypes about Tinder. These include: “It’s not Tinder until you send a message.”, “Billions of messages have been sent on Tinder. What will yours be?”, “Tinder is about people you want to know... start here”. The blurbs that include stereotypes about Tinder inexplicitly acknowledge the lack of legitimacy that Tinder has as a dating site, and thus establish the website’s countercultural reputation. The messaging feature breaks from Tinder’s strict procedures as a game and allows an open platform for people to communicate with others making this part of Tinder more like a dating app than a game. In acknowledging stereotypes both about dating and Tinder, these blurbs attempt to break down the stereotypes.

Creating a Commonality

In general, relationships are formed based off of people finding a commonality with another person. On Tinder, commonality message blurbs seek to create commonalities between people who know little to nothing about one another besides the fact that they both swiped right. Examples of commonality blurbs include: “You’re both addicted to Tinder... that’s something you both have in common.”, “Ask them about your mutual friends”, “They’re staring at the same thing... write the first message.” In these blurbs, Tinder takes a proactive role in being a dating

app by attempting to create a commonality between the users who have already matched with each other based off of the previous procedures of the game.

While most blurbs can be separated into these three categories, many of them will appear in several categories. Each blurb is reflective of the procedures of Tinder in that, each ask something different from the player. As discussed, in some cases the blurbs call the player to individual action. Other blurbs may either present or reject a stereotype about dating or Tinder to encourage the player to make a move. Some blurbs will either create a commonality among the players or ask the player to create a commonality with another person. Each different type of blurb is reflective of the procedures inherent in Tinder- meet first based off of initial attraction then worry about making a move, moving past stereotypes, or finding a commonality.

Implications: To Play or Not to Play

Interestingly, Tinder has tried to change certain appearances of its game like qualities. In older versions of Tinder, when players matched with each other, they had the option to “send message” or “keep playing.” In Tinder 5.0, when players match with one another, their choices are to either “send message” or “keep swiping.” The direct reference of “playing” was removed from the app. In gauging users’ response to the new phrasing, *Business Insider* looked at tweets about the change. Twitter user @MathewMatysik tweeted, “Tinder changed from ‘Keep Playing’ to ‘Keep Swiping’. Excuse me, but Tinder is definitely a game! Why else would I download it?” (MathewMatysik, 2016). Another Twitter user @mojitohanna tweeted, “Tinder may have changed the ‘keep playing’ option to say ‘keep swiping’ but if you think I’m taking it out of my games folder you are WRONG” (mojitohanna, 2016). However, there were users excited by the notion of Tinder taking the dating game more seriously. Twitter user @chaoticandrea tweeted, “I hate how when you match with someone on tinder it says “keep playing”... You think me

looking for a boyfriend is a game???” (chaoticandrea, 2016). Just as most games evolve in relation to user response, so has Tinder. The change in phrasing may have removed one explicit reference to gaming; however, as demonstrated earlier in the blurbs, Tinder still provides its *players* with many other explicit references to gaming.

Previous research has studied online dating and the procedural rhetoric of games; however, there is little research on the procedural rhetoric of online dating sites (Shepherd, 2016), especially mobile phone dating apps. Through the study of procedural rhetoric as defined by Bogost (2010), this paper aimed to show how Tinder has gamified dating. By looking at the procedural rhetoric of Tinder, this paper contributes to literature on online dating as well as procedural rhetoric. My findings show that the procedural rhetoric of Tinder does indeed make it a mobile dating game. First, I examined the basic procedures of Tinder and its game-like features. After engaging with the game, I found references of gaming in the message boxes of players who have not messaged before, referred to as “message blurbs.” These message blurbs explicitly referred to gaming and, in many cases, referred to itself as a game. Additionally, I referred to instances when Tinder had been referred to as a game by popular press sources. Further research could explore how Tinder’s procedures as a game affect the user’s experience, as well as the effect that treating dating as a game has on the relationships that Tinder produces.

Tinder is revolutionizing traditional online dating sites as well. Other dating apps have begun to implement gaming features like those of Tinder (Howard, 2015). This offers a rather serious implication for other online dating sites. Users who prefer traditional online dating sites to find more meaningful matches may be at a disadvantage if Tinder continues to gamify all aspects of online dating. Interestingly, Tinder tried to lose a feature of its game when it changed

“keep playing” to “keep swiping”. This offers an interesting implication for Tinder as a game, is it trying to move towards being a more serious dating platform, or is it a game... can it be both?

Future research could also explore the algorithms at work in Tinder. Due to the time limitations of this study, I was unable to explore the algorithms at work within Tinder. Estee Beck (2016) makes a strong case about the persuasive nature of algorithms: “...Algorithms are persuasive because of their performative nature and the values and beliefs embedded and encoded in their structures” (Beck, 2016, p. 2). The algorithms of Tinder could offer more implications about the app’s procedural rhetoric. The gamification of dating offers interesting implications for how people will continue to develop meaningful relationships online.

Conclusion

“They love me, they love me not, they love me, they love me not...” The popular mobile dating app, Tinder, has tapped into a historical truth about dating- it is a game filled with risks, rewards, and sometimes surprise winners. During his lecture at the University of Mary Washington in 2017, Dr. Douglas Eyman suggested that when studying digital rhetoric, it is best to look at it as a snapshot in time because the nature of digital rhetoric is ever changing. Tinder, it is a snapshot of the way in which mobile dating apps are connecting people via games. According to *Forbes*, Tinder is proclaimed as “The world’s hottest app” (Tinder), and it lends itself well to being captured as a snapshot of how mobile dating apps are connecting people through games.

The implications of Tinder’s gamification of dating can give potential insight to the study of digital rhetoric by studying how people are finding meaningful relationships in a game. As more and more people are finding relationships online, mobile dating sites such as Tinder offer a

unique opportunity for rhetorical study. I have argued that through its procedural rhetoric, Tinder is a game, a persuasive game that is worthy of further study.

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